Reverence for the Japanese Mother

By MRS. ELIZABETH ATWOOD

THERE is but one way to really know and appreciate the Japanese mother, and that is to be a guest in her home. And before visiting such a home it is well to know something about it, something about the dwelling itself and the family.

The home I have in mind was neither that of a very rich or very poor family, but of the well-to-do middle class. There were the father, mother, four children and three maids, together with a general handy man who supplied the "motive power" in his master's rickshaw and also worked in the garden. Everyone has a garden in Japan, even if they have no more than a square yard of soil. Four servants would indicate considerable riches in this country, especially in these days, but not so in Japan. The wealthy Japanese have thirty or more servants. And people whom we would regard as rather poor in this country generally manage to have one servant.

The father in this family held a good position in a large commercial importing house and spoke English very well indeed, as did his charming wife. The older son was in what is called the "middle school" preparing for college, the younger son in primary school, and the girl was taught privately at home. The fourth child was too young for school.

This dwelling is a charming affair of wood and bamboo. It is a two-story house, inclosed with a high bamboo fence; on one side stretches a dainty little garden beautified by a tiny pond in which are sparkling goldfish; dwarfed pine, maple, and a few flowers grow here in season, and the entrance to the home is made picturesque by a rather imposing heavy wooden gate on top of which is a sloping roof of tile.

Within the house there are eight rooms, besides the servants' quarters which are away at the rear, quite by themselves, and the kitchen and bath. Just why these two latter rooms are never taken into account when reckoning the capacity of a Japanese house I do not know, but such is the case. Six of the rooms are on the ground floor and two are in the second story which is reached by a ladder-like pair of stairs beset with perils for foreign feet, though the Japanese do not seem to mind climbing them in the least. Rooms in Japan are measured by the number of mats they contain and the standard size of a mat is six feet by three. We will say that this house contains, upstairs, one room of eight mats and one of six, while downstairs we find two eight mat rooms, one of six and one of three.

One of the most interesting spots in a Japanese house is the kitchen. Unlike the other rooms, its floor is not covered with mats, but is partly wooden and partly earthen or stone. The boards in the wooden floor permit of being lifted up so that the space between them and the ground underneath can be used as a sort of cellar. A sink, a square earthen firebox over which the cooking is done and shelves laden with rice tubs, casks of soy, various jars and pots and kettles, nails from which hang sieves, wooden ladles and long-handled bamboo cups and dippers, comprise the appointments of the kitchen. Passing through the kitchen, we come to the bathroom, which to the Japanese way of thinking is the most essential room in the house. The bath tub is made of wood in oval or oblong shape, so deep that when the bather sits down in it, his head is just level with the top. At one end of the tub is an iron pipe into which charcoal is placed for heating the water. In front of the pipe is nailed a board, so that the bather may not burn himself by coming in contact with the hot iron. The floor is built sloping so that the water splashed about will run into a trough and out to the sewer through a drainage pipe. But the queer thing about the Japanese bath is that you must do your bathing before you get into it. Each one gives himself a vigorous scrubbing before entering the bath and in this way the whole family can bathe the same evening and when all are through, the water will be almost as clear as it was in the beginning, clean enough, indeed, to be used for wash water on the following day.

THE day opens early for a mother in Japan, by four-thirty in the morning or at least five o'clock. As soon as she sees the first streak of daylight appearing through the cracks of the wooden shutters, she arises and quietly slipping off to the servants' room, so that she will not wake the other sleepers, she calls the maids who hasten into their clothes in short order. Soon they begin removing the wooden shutters, which occupation is carried on with such a rattling and banging that only the very heaviest of the sleepers could possibly continue their slumbers through the noise, surely not with the morning sunlight flooding the rooms and striking them full in the face. In the bathroom brass bowls of water are set out and thither the family retreat in turn for their morning ablutions. After they have finished, father and the boys stroll up and down the sunny garden, toothbrush in mouth. The Japanese have a way of brushing their teeth which is all their own. They use no water but sprinkling the toothbrush liberally with powder, keep it in their mouths for five or ten minutes at a time. While the male portion of the family are sunning themselves outside, mother is busy directing and helping the maids to gather up the mattresses and quilts and stow them away in the closets, to fly the feather dusters and get the rooms in order for breakfast. As soon as this task has been finished tea is set out and a small dish containing the morning relish, very likely tiny plums pickled in salt brine. Father comfortably seats himself and enjoys his tea and morning paper, while mother bustles around seeing that the older children have their breakfast and get off to school, which everywhere in Japan begins by eight o'clock, if not earlier. Very likely the older boy and girl may have half or three-quarters of an hour trip to school so they have to be off in good season. Daughter must have her hair plaited and a ribbon on top, according to present schoolgirl style which, I would have you know, is as much regarded in Japan as in America. Over her kimono she wears a pleated skirt which is fastened with a narrow girdle or sash about her waist. This pleated skirt has come into fashion along with gymnastics and other modern branches of training for girls and is really a great invention, since it permits a far more active use of the limbs than is possible to the wearer of a kimono.

After the boys and girls have finished their breakfast which consists of a bowl of soup, several bowls of rice apiece, a bit of fish and pickled vegetables and plenty of cups of tea, they hurry off to school, mother seeing to it that their lunches are ready for them and that none of their schoolbooks are forgotten. Generally at the last moment there is just as much scrambling and hunting for lost or mislaid articles as takes place in an American home. After the children have set off for school, father and mother have their breakfast together in peace and quiet. Then, like the dutiful wife that she is, mother sets about getting her husband ready for his day at the office. She brings out the suit of foreign clothes which he wears at business and he dons this in exchange for his comfortable kimono. His jinrikisha awaits him at the door and soon he is bowling away with his wife and servants bowing him out of sight.

By this time the clock is striking eight, and now that her family is out of the way, mother sets about the household tasks in good earnest. First the baby must be given his morning bath, and after he is disposed of, the bedding, which has been hastily stowed away, is brought out and spread on the veranda to sun, the lamps are taken into the kitchen, cleaned and filled with oil and the rooms are all thoroughly gone over so that not a speck of dust is to be seen anywhere. Now the tradespeople begin to arrive and the mother steps out to the kitchen door and looks over the vegetables which are brought for her inspection, making a selection for the needs of the day. One after the other the venders of different goods put in their appearance—the fish man, the bean-curd seller, the fruit dealer, the faggot and charcoal man and the boys with rice and soy. Sometimes the mistress of the house pays for her purchases as she makes them, but more often they are put on a bill which is sent in the last day of the month for payment.

EVERY day is wash day in a Japanese house and this task falls to the lot of the maids, the mistress only needing to have a care that the work is done properly. A Japanese kimono has to be taken apart every time it is washed so that the outer part and the linings may be done separately. The pieces are well scrubbed and then starched and spread out to dry on a smooth board which is placed against the side of the house where the sun will strike it. This method of drying requires no ironing, for the cloth when removed from the boards is entirely free from wrinkles.

The hour from eleven to twelve is generally a Japanese mother's leisure time and she improves the moments by looking through the papers so that she may be sufficiently well informed to converse on matters of interest with her husband and her children, or perhaps she reads a chapter in a novel or an article in one of the several magazines for women which are a product of the last quarter century. After she has finished her noonday meal, which, since she partakes of it alone, is a very simple one and eaten in short order, the mother turns her attention to needlework. You can very easily imagine that with all her own and her children's clothes to make, to say nothing of a large share of her husband's, the Japanese mother always has plenty of sewing on hand. She does not, of course, do it all herself, but calls in her servants to help her. They come into the sitting room and squat on the floor near her so that she can direct and supervise their work. When a dress is once made, the work is not over and done with as it is with us, for Japanese clothes require constant unmaking and remaking. Then, too, the Japanese mother must make and keep in order all the bedding, mattresses, covers, and so forth, and also the cushions, a large supply of which must always be kept on hand. So if every day is wash day in a Japanese house, it may be said with equal truth that every day is sewing day, for the work would pile up insurmountably, were the mistress of the house constantly bent upon diminishing it.

But the whole afternoon cannot be devoted to sewing, for various interruptions are bound to occur. Perhaps the mother must go out for shopping, or friends and relatives may drop in for an afternoon chat, or more likely still the hairdresser will put in her appearance. It is almost impossible for a Japanese woman to comb her own hair, that is, if she follows the old-fashioned style of hair dressing which requires the application of oil and a rather complicated arrangement of hair, combs and ornaments at the back of the head. When this arrangement has once been effected, it will last for several days, perhaps a week, without requiring to be done over. The hairdresser in the Japanese home fills the place of the village seamstress in the American home. She is the general dispenser of information and gossip, so you can see that her visits are awaited with a good deal of eagerness.

By four o'clock or earlier the children are back from school and by five the husband returns from his office and his arrival is the signal for dinner to be served. This is the most substantial meal of the day, as well as the most leisurely one, sometimes an hour or two being spent in partaking of it. Afterward the family sit together with hands held out to warm over the brazier, talking over the affairs of the day, each member of the circle feeling free to enter into the conversation, the children telling incidents connected with their school life, the father talking of business or political affairs and mother regaling the household with an account of some wonderful exhibition of precocity on the part of the baby, for Japanese babies, like babies in every other land, are regarded as precocious in their mothers' eyes.

It is quite true that the Japanese mother's life is lived almost wholly within the four walls of home. If she is very modern and progressive, she may belong to the Ladies' Educational Association. But if she is never, or at least seldom, able to leave her home, that will not serve to make her unhappy. The Japanese mother finds her pleasure in her husband and her children. They return her love and devotion, which is quite happiness enough.

Japanese War Savings Poster

Japan has adapted the war savings idea and is advertising it in the picturesque manner native to the country. The message on this unique poster, which is one of several distributed by the Japanese Government is: "Success and happiness is the beautiful flower that springs from the plain brown bulb of Thrift and Savings."